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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [UNSC](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SCENESETTER FOR CENTCOM COMMANDER GENERAL
DAVID PETRAEUS

REF: A. BEIRUT 1639
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1638

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

OVERVIEW

[1](#)1. (C) General Petraeus: Welcome back to Lebanon. Your trip provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce the message of strong U.S. support for a sovereign, democratic, and stable Lebanon to reassure Lebanon's moderates that a change in the U.S. Administration does not equal a change in U.S. policy. The expansion of the U.S.-Lebanese military partnership represents an historic opportunity to bolster the cause of democracy, peace and stability in Lebanon and the Middle East. The October 6, 2008 Joint Military Commission (JMC) meeting, the first U.S.-Lebanon bilateral defense talks, offered an opportunity to confirm the mutual benefits of the relationship and press for further engagement in key areas. Since the departure of Syrian forces in April of 2005, the USG has provided over \$410 million in training and equipment to the LAF (as well as \$76 million to the national police, the Internal Security Forces).

[1](#)2. (C) The MOD will continue to press us for release of some form of Close Air Support with a precision weapons capability. The LAF has submitted a letter of request for three Grand Caravan fixed wing aircraft and 135 Hellfire missiles. MOD will press for release of Tactical UAVs (RAVEN), TOW-2A missiles, Night Vision Equipment, and perhaps precision artillery munitions. The LAF is also in USCENTCOM-led discussions with the Jordanian Armed Forces to transfer M-60 tanks to replace the aging Soviet T-55s and U.S. M-48 tanks. This transfer will require Third Party Transfer authority from the USG. Another issue: hoped-for Saudi funding for the Close Air Support and tanks is not yet confirmed. You can expect that your interlocutors, Prime Minister Siniora and LAF Commander Gen. Jean Kahwagi, will ask about U.S. support for key defense procurement needs and also ask you for additional military equipment and training for the military intelligence service (LAF-G2). We should continue to assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (and Internal Security Forces) while underscoring the need for Lebanese government commitment to combat terrorism, strengthen border controls, bring Hizballah's arms under state authority, and ensure implementation of UNSCRs 1559 and 1701.

THE INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE

[1](#)3. (C) There have been significant political developments since May 2008, when the government's decision to dismantle

Hizballah's communications systems and remove the chief of airport security sparked armed clashes between Hizballah and Lebanese civilians. Hizballah closed Beirut International Airport and took control of most of west Beirut in a standoff that lasted several days. The Qatari-brokered Doha Agreement of May 21 put an end to the months-long political impasse and paved the way for the May 25 election of consensus candidate and former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as President. After much wrangling between the majority and the opposition, Prime Minister Siniora completed formation of a national unity government on July 11, composed, per the Doha Agreement, of 16 majority ministers, 11 from the opposition, and three for President Sleiman (including the key Defense and Interior ministry portfolios).

¶4. (C) The Saad Hariri-led March 14 majority coalition and Hizballah-led opposition coalition have been uneasy partners in the new national unity government. Both coalitions are intensely focused on parliamentary elections scheduled to take place next spring, which we expect to be close. The Christian vote, divided between the two groups, will be decisive in determining who wins the next majority. Many, especially on March 14's side, are pinning their hopes on President Sleiman forming his own list of independent Christians -- or backing such candidates behind the scenes -- to challenge opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun. While it is conceivable that either the current majority or the current Hizballah-led opposition will win a clear majority to form the next government, it is more likely that neither will score a decisive victory and the two sides will form a national unity government, as exists now.

¶5. (C) Hizballah's arms remain the most controversial issue. As called for in the Doha Agreement, President Sleiman launched a National Dialogue to discuss the national defense strategy, including the role of Hizballah's weapons. To date he has chaired two sessions, with the next session scheduled for December 22. Expectations in Lebanon are low, however, that the Dialogue will actually lead to an agreement whereby Hizballah would actually give up its arms.

HIZBALLAH ACTIONS

¶6. (C) On August 28, a Lebanese Armed Forces helicopter operating in Hizballah-controlled territory in southern Lebanon was shot down, resulting in the death of an LAF officer. A young Hizballah fighter was arrested, and the military investigation is ongoing. On November 24, Israel sent a letter to the President of the UN Security Council accusing Hizballah of conducting military maneuvers both north and south of the Litani river (the latter would be a violation of UNSCR 1701). However, LAF Commander General Kahwagi told us that there had been no such maneuvers south of the Litani, which was also reported by UNIFIL contacts.

SPORADIC VIOLENCE; RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

¶7. (C) Meanwhile, sporadic violence has plagued the predominantly northern city of Tripoli and surrounding areas. A clash in the north between rival Christian groups on September 17 resulted in two deaths. In reaction to the violence, various groups have engaged in "reconciliation" meetings, including the October 26 meeting between Hariri and Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah (their first-ever since the 2006 war ended), followed by lower level talks on policy issues, ongoing talks between Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party and his rival Druze leader and Hizballah to discuss security issues, and thus far unsuccessful attempts between rival Christian parties. The LAF's attention is focused on the Beddawi and Ain al Hilweh Palestinian refugee camps.

REGIONAL ISSUES

¶18. (C) Sleiman was in the U.S. September 23-26. He addressed the UNGA and meet Secretary Rice in New York and traveled to Washington DC to meet President Bush and Secretary Gates on September 25. He sought the President's views on the Middle East Peace Process. Sleiman argues that failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has fueled terrorism in the region, including Lebanon, where extremists use the Palestinian cause to justify their actions. Sleiman also traveled to New York September 12-13 to attend the Saudi-sponsored Interfaith Dialogue, where he again raised the issue and stressed that Palestinian refugees could not seek permanent settlement in Lebanon. Sleiman traveled to Iran November 24-25, one of several foreign trips he has made since becoming president.

¶19. (C) The Government of Lebanon has urged that Israel withdraw from the disputed Sheba'a Farms territory and for Sheba'a to be placed under the authority of the United Nations. Government of Lebanon leadership has also urged the United States to pressure Israel to put an end to Israeli overflights and turn over complete cluster bomb strike data to aid in demining efforts.

¶10. (C) President Sleiman traveled to Damascus in mid-August and reached agreement with President Asad that Syria and Lebanon establish diplomatic relations between the two countries for the first time since Lebanon's independence. However, Asad yielded little in terms of demarcating the common border (including Sheba'a Farms) or providing information on Lebanese citizens presumed missing in Syria. The latest report by the UN's Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team, dated August 27, highlights the fact that Lebanon has made almost no progress in securing its border with Syria and points of entry as required by UNSCR 1701. Meanwhile, numerous GOL officials have since traveled to Damascus, including Interior Minister Baroud, who agreed to form a bilateral security committee in the wake of Syrian accusations that Fatah al-Islam extremists in Lebanon are posing a threat to Syria (Ref B).

U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

¶11. (C) The benefit the USG seeks from the strong military-to-military relationship with the LAF is to develop a valid alternative to Hizballah for the people of Lebanon to turn to for protection. A strong LAF also serves to counteract Iranian and Syrian influence in Lebanon. Since the departure of Syrian forces in April of 2005, the USG has provided over \$410 million in training and equipment to the LAF. The bulk of this aid has been Foreign Military Funding (FMF), but also include significant amounts of International Education and Training (IMET), Section 1206 funding, Counterterrorism Force Protection (CTFP), Joint Combined Exercises and Training (JCET), and various other military aid. The Lebanon FMF request for FY-2010 is at \$100 million; FY-2010 IMET request is \$1.5 million. The LAF five year acquisition plan is designed to take full advantage of these historic amounts of military aid.

AREAS FOR GREATER MILITARY COOPERATION

¶12. (C) Interoperability: Currently there is an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between Lebanon and the U.S. which was used to great advantage by both countries in the Nahr al Bared fight in 2007. There is no Status of Forces agreement (SOFA) or Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and no expectation the GOL would approve such agreements in the foreseeable future.

¶13. (C) Modernization: After considerable U.S. urging, Lebanon has drafted a five year modernization plan. Getting Lebanon to ensure that its requests for Foreign Military funding (FMF) acquisitions are consistent with its plan will be key, and we should stress this in JMC discussions. The MOD has begun to think more critically about whether they

still need to retain their stock of aging and difficult-to-maintain Soviet equipment, particularly the T-54/55 tanks as well as the aging M-48 tanks by agreeing to receive 66 M-06 tanks from Jordan.

¶14. (C) Training: The key component of U.S. military training to the LAF will be the Comprehensive Training Program (CTP). Our goal is to have 8-10 ARCENT-supervised civilians trainers in place by mid-2009 to train LAF in all war fighting functions, including marksmanship and battle staff training. Meanwhile, the robust JCET program needs to be maintained at its current level of six missions per year. Mobile Training Teams from ARCENT, MARCENT, AFCENT, NAVCENT and the USCG should also continue to be programmed to assist the LAF.

WEAPONS RELEASE

¶15. (C) The MOD will continue to press, at a minimum, for release of some form of Close Air Support with a precision weapons capability, (Note: LAF has submitted an LOR for three Grand Caravan fixed-wing aircraft and 135 Hellfire missiles.) They also will press for tactical UAVs (RAVEN), TOW-2A missiles, Night Vision Equipment, and perhaps precision artillery munitions. The LAF is also in USCENCOM-led discussions with the Jordanian Armed Forces to transfer M-60 tanks to replace the aging Soviet T-55s and U.S. M-48 tanks. This transfer will require Third Party Transfer authority from the USG. The Close Air Support and tanks require funding that the Lebanese hope will come from Saudi Arabia (however, that funding is not nailed down; DOD/OSD is also looking at the possibility of UAE funding). You can expect that your interlocutors will ask you for additional military equipment and training for use by their military intelligence service. The FY-2010 FMF request for Lebanon is \$100 million; the FY-2010 FMF request is \$4 million. (Note: We understand that during President Sleiman's November 24-25 trip to Tehran, the Iranians had made a generous offer of military support to Lebanon, which Sleiman diplomatically declined.

YOUR INTERLOCUTORS

¶16. (C) Prime Minister Siniora is likely to press for enhanced U.S. efforts to equip the LAF. He is frustrated with Lebanon's lack of progress with the Israelis on the Blue Line, Ghajar, and strike data provision. He is focused on developing a strategy with donors to take control of Lebanon's borders. However he has not been overly concerned by Syrian deployment along the Syrian border with Lebanon,

saying he would take Syria's claim that it was trying to reduce smuggling at face value.

¶17. (C) LAF Commander Kahwagi has tended to focus on tactical level issues with recent U.S. visitors. He consistently complains that the flow of U.S. assistance is very slow. Kahwagi is not squeamish about USG activities and associating the LAF with USG training and doctrine. His straight forward approach is greatly admired by the LAF. Kahwagi is a graduate of the U.S. Army's Infantry Center at Fort Benning, Georgia and Italy's War College. He was also a Marshall Center graduate in 2006.

KEY MESSAGES FOR THIS VISIT

¶18. (SBU) Your visit is a good opportunity to deliver several key messages, as follows:

--Reiterate the strong and enduring U.S. commitment to an independent and sovereign Lebanon.

--Stress the constructive role that a peaceful and prosperous Lebanon can play in contributing to regional stability.

--Emphasize that the U.S. plans to continue to provide support to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions, including a robust package of U.S. military training and assistance, as well as assistance to the police (Internal Security Forces).

--Emphasize that continued USG support for the LAF, particularly in the U.S. Congress, is tied to perceptions that there is serious action being taken to Hizballah's use of force under GOL control.

--Note that in addition the U.S. will continue to assist the Government of Lebanon in building economic viability and building governance capacity.

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